

Lent 2A (3/12/17)
Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

The life of baptism is a daily rebirth by water and Spirit. Each new day, our gestating faith emerges from the comfortable obscurity of the womb into the brightness of day, exposed and vulnerable, yet filled with promise. The labor is God's, but the new life is ours. Held in God's motherly embrace, we open our eyes to the world around us, no longer shielded from reality, but able to see it, understand it, and navigate it together by the lead of our brother Christ.

In the early centuries of the church, the final stage of preparation for Holy Baptism took place during the season of Lent. After a three-year process of study and mentorship, candidates for baptism, or “catechumens,” underwent a more rigorous period of instruction during Lent, which included participation in special vigils, laying on of hands, and fasting. In the early morning hours of Easter, they entered one by one into the baptismal chamber, removed their clothing as a reminder that they brought nothing with them from the old life to the new, and descended into a pool. Immersed three times in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they emerged newborn children of God. And, donning fresh white robes – symbols of the fundamental dignity bestowed on them by Christ – the newly baptized joined their kindred in faith at daybreak to taste their first communion, a sacred meal to strengthen them for daily discipleship in the world to which they were sent out again.¹

¹ See Daniel W. Erlander, *Water Washed and Spirit Born*, 16-19.

Our Gospel from John today records Jesus' famous reference to baptism as *rebirth*: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again... without being born of water and Spirit." In our context, **the term "born again" is laden with religious baggage**, held captive by a certain brand of Christian witness that tends to drive a wedge between those who are "saved" and those who aren't. On the other hand, those who don't identify with the "born again" moniker tend to view those who do with skepticism, pigeonholing them as religious nuts. In either case, **the language has become trite and divisive, reducing Jesus' striking image to little more than a litmus test for true faith or fanaticism, depending on your perspective.**² But, in light of the early church's baptismal practices, the understanding of baptism as rebirth takes on a new significance, one that we can reclaim.

The extended period of preparation for baptism in the early church was something like a pregnancy. Newfound faith gestated for three years, developing gradually in the warmth of the church's care. Then, the season of Lent leading up to baptism was something like labor, a final phase of intense anticipation as the event itself drew near. And finally, **the passage through baptismal water was something like delivery, as new Christians emerged, wet and naked, into the light of Easter morning with a new sense of belonging in the family of faith.**

² See Anna Carter Florence, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 71.

Baptismal practices have changed, but we've preserved the sacrament's core meaning: **a definitive entry into new life, a naming and claiming by our devoted heavenly Parent, a promise of love and support from family members, and a dinner to celebrate.** No matter the age or experience of the candidate, baptism is, in fact, a birth!

And, although the sacrament itself occurs only once, baptism retains its significance forever. "A Christian life," Martin Luther writes, "is nothing else than a *daily baptism*, begun once and continuing ever after" – baptism "makes us God's own" once for all, yet it "daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains,"³ like a mother's love. In other words, **rebirth by water and Spirit is always new, as each new morning greets the baptized like a little Easter, another chance to be embraced into the risen life of Christ.**

For as joyful as birth can be, however, it's also destabilizing. The newborn is pushed from the known confines of the womb into the confusion of radically new surroundings. The darkness of gestation suddenly gives way to blinding light. Blinking her eyes, the baby experiences the sensations of life in the world for the first time, confronted with the reality that she must eventually learn to see, to understand, and to navigate.

So, too, with the new life of baptism. Just a few verses beyond our assigned Gospel text from John, Jesus insists that **faith, like birth, involves a passage**

³ *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, 465-6.

from darkness to light: “those do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Recall that Nicodemus, a respected leader in the community, has come to Jesus by night. Something has drawn Nicodemus to this unusual teacher, but he’s prudent, so he doesn’t take the unnecessary risk of approaching Jesus in the light of public scrutiny. His desire to relate to Jesus – to understand God’s purpose – is genuine, but it’s also shrouded in secrecy. His faith, in other words, is not ready to be born. But **Jesus induces the labor.** *You who remain in the womb, come to the light, he insists. Be born into the fullness of faith, and join in the life that God has dreamed for us.*

Dear church, the life of baptism is a daily rebirth by water and Spirit. **We may prefer to stay in the womb, restricting our faith to the safe confines of church and private life. But each new day, our gestating faith emerges from the comfortable obscurity of the womb into the brightness of day, exposed and vulnerable, yet filled with promise. The labor is God’s, as is the unshakable love, like the love of a new parent. But the new life is ours. Held in God’s motherly embrace, we open our eyes to the world around us, no longer shielded from reality, but able to see it, understand it, and navigate it together by the lead of our brother Christ.**